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# A MASQUE OF REASON



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By

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*A fair oasis in the purest desert.  
'A man sits leaning back against a palm.  
His wife lies by him looking at the sky.*

*Man* You're not asleep?

*Wife* No, I can hear you. Why?

*Man* I said the incense tree's on fire again.

*Wife* You mean the Burning Bush?

*Man* The Christmas Tree.

*Wife* I shouldn't be surprised.

*Man* The strangest light!

*Wife* There's a strange light on everything today.

*Man* The myrrh tree gives it. Smell the rosin burning?  
The ornaments the Greek artificers  
Made for the Emperor Alexius,  
The Star of Bethlehem, the pomegranates,  
The birds, seem all on fire with Paradise.  
And hark, the gold cnameled nightingales  
Are singing. Yes, and look, the Tree is troubled.  
Someone's caught in the branches.

*Wife* So there is.  
He can't get out.

*Man* He's loose! He's out!

*Wife* It's God.  
I'd know Him by Blake's picture anywhere.  
Now what's He doing?

*Man* Pitching throne, I guess,  
Here by our atoll.

*Wife* Something Byzantine.  
(*The throne's a plywood flat, prefabricated,  
That God pulls lightly upright on its hinges  
And stands beside, supporting it in place.*)

Perhaps for an Olympic Tournament,  
Or Court of Love.

*Man*

More likely Royal Court—

Or Court of Law, and this is Judgment Day.  
I trust it is. Here's where I lay aside  
My varying opinion of myself  
And come to rest in an official verdict.  
Suffer yourself to be admired, my love,  
As Waller says.

*Wife*

Or not admired. Go over  
And speak to Him before the others come.  
Tell Him He may remember you: you're Job.

*God*

Oh, I remember well: you're Job, my Patient.  
How are you now? I trust you're quite recovered,  
And feel no ill effects from what I gave you.

*Job*

Gave me in truth: I like the frank admission.  
I am a name for being put upon.  
But, yes, I'm fine, except for now and then  
A reminiscent twinge of rheumatism.  
The let-up's heavenly. You perhaps will tell us  
If that is all there is to be of Heaven,  
Escape from so great pains of life on earth  
It gives a sense of let-up calculated  
To last a fellow to Eternity.

*God* Yes, by and by. But first a larger matter.

I've had you on my mind a thousand years  
To thank you someday for the way you helped me  
Establish once for all the principle  
There's no connection man can reason out  
Between his just deserts and what he gets.  
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.  
'Twas a great demonstration we put on.  
I should have spoken sooner had I found  
The word I wanted. You would have supposed  
One who in the beginning *was* the Word  
Would be in a position to command it.  
I have to wait for words like anyone.  
Too long I've owed you this apology  
For the apparently unmeaning sorrow  
You were afflicted with in those old days.  
But it was of the essence of the trial  
You shouldn't understand it at the time.  
It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning.  
And it came out all right. I have no doubt  
You realize by now the part you played  
To stultify the Deuteronomist  
And change the tenor of religious thought.  
My thanks are to you for releasing me  
From moral bondage to the human race.  
The only free will there at first was man's,  
Who could do good or evil as he chose.  
I had no choice but I must follow him

With forfeits and rewards he understood—  
Unless I liked to suffer loss of worship.  
I had to prosper good and punish evil.  
You changed all that. You set me free to reign.  
You are the Emancipator of your God,  
And as such I promote you to a saint.

*Job* You hear him, Thyatira: we're a saint.  
Salvation in our case is retroactive.  
We're saved, we're saved, whatever else it means.

*Job's Wife* Well, after all these years!

*Job* This is my wife.

*Job's Wife* If You're the deity I assume You are—  
(I'd know You by Blake's picture anywhere)—

*God* The best, I'm told, I ever have had taken.

*Job's Wife* —I have a protest I would lodge with You.  
I want to ask You if it stands to reason  
That women prophets should be burned as witches  
Whereas men prophets are received with honor.

*Job* Except in their own country, Thyatira.

*God* You're not a witch?

*Job's Wife*

No.

*God* Have you ever been one?

*Job* Sometimes she thinks she has and gets herself  
Worked up about it. But she really hasn't—  
Not in the sense of having to my knowledge  
Predicted anything that came to pass.

*Job's Wife* The witch of Endor was a friend of mine.

*God* You wouldn't say she fared so very badly.  
I noticed when she called up Samuel  
His spirit had to come. Apparently  
A witch was stronger than a prophet there.

*Job's Wife* But she was burned for witchcraft.

*God* That is not  
Of record in my Note Book.

*Job's Wife* Well, she was.  
And I should like to know the reason why.

*God* There you go asking for the very thing

We've just agreed I didn't have to give.

*(The throne collapses. But He picks it up  
And this time locks it up and leaves it.)*

Where has she been the last half hour or so?  
She wants to know why there is still injustice.  
I answer flatly: That's the way it is,  
And bid my will avouch it like Macbeth.  
We may as well go back to the beginning  
And look for justice in the case of Segub.

*Job* Oh, Lord, let's not go *back* to anything.

*God* Because your wife's past won't bear looking into?  
In our great moment what did you do, Madam?  
What did you try to make your husband say?

*Job's Wife* No, let's not live things over. I don't care.  
I stood by Job. I may have turned on You.  
Job scratched his boils and tried to think what he  
Had done or not done to or for the poor.  
The test is always how we treat the poor.  
It's time the poor were treated by the state  
In some way not so penal as the poorhouse.  
That's one thing more to put on Your agenda.  
Job hadn't done a thing, poor innocent.  
I told him not to scratch: it made it worse.

If I said once I said a thousand times,  
Don't scratch! And when, as rotten as his skin,  
His tents blew all to pieces, I picked up  
Enough to build him every night a pup tent  
Around him so it wouldn't touch and hurt him.  
I did my wifely duty. I should tremble!  
All You can seem to do is lose Your temper  
When reason-hungry mortals ask for reasons.  
Of course, in the abstract high singular  
There isn't any universal reason;  
And no one but a man would think there was.  
You don't catch women trying to be Plato.  
Still there must be lots of unsystematic  
Stray scraps of palliative reason  
It wouldn't hurt You to vouchsafe the faithful.  
You thought it was agreed You needn't give them.  
You thought to suit Yourself. I've not agreed  
To anything with anyone.

*Job*

There, there,  
You go to sleep. God must await events  
As well as words.

*Job's Wife*

I'm serious. God's had  
Aeons of time and still it's mostly women  
Get burned for prophecy, men almost never.

*Job* God needs time just as much as you or I  
To get things done. Reformers fail to see that.  
She'll go to sleep. Nothing keeps her awake  
But physical activity, I find.  
Try to read to her and she drops right off.

*God* She's beautiful.

*Job* Yes, she was just remarking  
She now felt younger by a thousand years  
Than the day she was born.

*God* That's about right,  
I should have said. You got your age reversed  
When time was found to be a space dimension  
That could, like any space, be turned around in?

*Job* Yes, both of us: we saw to that at once.  
But, God, I have a question too to raise.  
(My wife gets in ahead of me with hers.)  
I need some help about this reason problem  
Before I am too late to be got right  
As to what reasons I agree to waive.  
I'm apt to string along with Thyatira.  
God knows—or rather, You know (God forgive me)  
I waived the reason for my ordeal—but—  
I have a question even there to ask—

In confidence. There's no one here but her,  
And she's a woman: she's not interested  
In general ideas and principles.

*God* What are her interests, Job?

*Job* Witch-women's rights.  
Humor her there or she will be confirmed  
In her suspicion You're no feminist.  
You have it in for women, she believes.  
Kipling invokes You as Lord God of Hosts.  
She'd like to know how You would take a prayer  
That started off Lord God of Hostesses.

*God* I'm charmed with her.

*Job* Yes, I could see You were.  
But to my question. I am much impressed  
With what You say we have established.  
Between us, You and I. .

*God* I make you see?  
It would be too bad if Columbus-like  
You failed to see the worth of your achievement.

*Job* You call it mine.

*God*

We groped it out together.

Any originality it showed

I give you credit for. My forte is truth,  
Or metaphysics, long the world's reproach  
For standing still in one place true forever;  
While science goes self-superseding on.

Look at how far we've left the current science  
Of Genesis behind. The wisdom there though,  
Is just as good as when I uttered it.

Still, novelty has doubtless an attraction.

*Job* So it's important who first thinks of things?

*God* I'm a great stickler for the author's name.  
By proper names I find I do my thinking.

*Job's Wife* God, who invented earth?

*Job*

What, still awake?

*God* Any originality it showed  
Was of the Devil. He invented Hell,  
False premises that are the original  
Of all originality, the sin  
That felled the angels, Wolsey should have said.  
As for the earth, we groped that out together,  
Much as your husband Job and I together

Found out the discipline man needed most  
Was to learn his submission to unreason;  
And that for man's own sake as well as mine,  
So he won't find it hard to take his orders  
From his inferiors in intelligence  
In peace and war—especially in war.

*Job* So he won't find it hard to take his war.

*God* You have the idea. There's not much I can tell you.

*Job* All very splendid. I am flattered proud  
To have been in on anything with You.  
'Twas a great demonstration if You say so.  
Though incidentally I sometimes wonder  
Why it had had to be at my expense.

*God* It had to be at somebody's expense.  
Society can never think things out:  
It has to see them acted out by actors,  
Devoted actors at a sacrifice—  
The ablest actors I can lay my hands on.  
Is that your answer?

*Job* No, for I have yet  
To ask my question. We disparage reason.  
But all the time it's what we're most concerned with.

There's will as motor and there's will as brakes.  
Reason is, I suppose, the steering gear.  
The will as brakes can't stop the will as motor  
For very long. We're plainly made to go.  
We're going anyway and may as well  
Have some say as to where we're headed for;  
Just as we will be talking anyway  
And may as well throw in a little sense.  
Let's do so now. Because I let You off  
From telling me Your reason, don't assume  
I thought You had none. Somewhere back  
I knew You had one. But this isn't it  
You're giving me. You say we groped this out.  
But if You will forgive me the irreverence,  
It sounds to me as if You thought it out,  
And took Your time to it. It seems to me  
An afterthought, a long long afterthought.  
I'd give more for one least beforehand reason  
Than all the justifying ex-post-facto  
Excuses trumped up by You for theologists.  
The front of being answerable to no one  
I'm with You in maintaining to the public.  
But Lord, we showed them what. The audience  
Has all gone home to bed. The play's played out.  
Come, after all these years—to satisfy me.  
I'm curious. And I'm a grown-up man:  
I'm not a child for You to put me off

And tantalize me with another "Oh, because."  
You'd be the last to want me to believe  
All Your effects were merely lucky blunders.  
That would be unbelief and atheism.  
The artist in me cries out for design.  
Such devilish ingenuity of torture  
Did seem unlike You, and I tried to think  
The reason might have been some other person's.  
But there is nothing You are not behind.  
I did not ask then, but it seems as if  
Now after all these years You might indulge me.  
Why did You hurt me so? I am reduced  
To asking flatly for a reason—outright.

*God* I'd tell you, Job—

*Job* All right, don't tell me then  
If you don't want to. I don't want to know.  
But what is all this secrecy about?  
I fail to see what fun, what satisfaction  
A God can find in laughing at how badly  
Men fumble at the possibilities  
When left to guess forever for themselves.  
The chances are when there's so much pretense  
Of metaphysical profundity  
The obscurity's a fraud to cover nothing.  
I've come to think no so-called hidden value's

Worth going after. Get down into things  
It will be found there's no more given there  
Than on the surface. If there ever was,  
The crypt was long since rifled by the Greeks.  
We don't know where we are, or who we are.  
We don't know one another; don't know You;  
Don't know what time it is. We don't know, don't we?  
Who says we don't? Who got up these misgivings?  
Oh, we know well enough to go ahead with.  
I mean we seem to know enough to act on.  
It comes down to a doubt about the wisdom  
Of having children—after having had them,  
So there is nothing we can do about it  
But warn the children they perhaps should have none.  
You could end this by simply coming out  
And saying plainly and unequivocally  
Whether there's any part of man immortal.  
Yet You don't speak. Let fools bemuse themselves  
By being baffled for the sake of being.  
I'm sick of the whole artificial puzzle.

*Job's Wife* You won't get any answers out of God.

*God* My kingdom, what an outbreak!

*Job's Wife* Job is right.  
Your kingdom, yes, Your kingdom come on earth.

Pray tell me what does that mean. Anything?  
Perhaps that earth is going to crack someday  
Like a big egg and hatch a heaven out  
Of all the dead and buried from their graves.  
One simple little statement from the throne  
Would put an end to such fantastic nonsense;  
And, too, take care of twenty of the four  
And twenty freedoms on the party docket.  
Or is it only four? My extra twenty  
Are freedoms from the need of asking questions.  
(I hope You know the game called twenty questions.)  
For instance, is there such a thing as Progress?  
Job says there's no such thing as Earth's becoming  
An easier place for man to save his soul in.  
Except as a hard place to save his soul in,  
A trial ground where he can try himself  
And find out whether he is any good,  
It would be meaningless. It might as well  
Be Heaven at once and have it over with.

*God* Two pitching on like this tend to confuse me.  
One at a time, please. I will answer Job first.  
I'm going to tell Job why I tortured him  
And trust it won't be adding to the torture.  
I was just showing off to the Devil, Job,  
As is set forth in chapters One and Two.

(*Job takes a few steps pacing.*) Do you mind?

(*God eyes him anxiously.*)

*Job*

No. No, I musn't.

'Twas human of You. I expected more  
Than I could understand and what I get  
Is almost less than I can understand.  
But I don't mind. Let's leave it as it stood.  
The point was it was none of my concern.  
I stick to that. But talk about confusion!  
How is that for a mix-up, Thyatira?  
Yet I suppose what seems to us confusion  
Is not confusion, but the form of forms,  
The serpent's tail stuck down the serpent's throat,  
Which is the symbol of eternity  
And also of the way all things come round,  
Or of how rays return upon themselves,  
To quote the greatest Western poem yet.  
Though I hold rays deteriorate to nothing,  
First white, then red, then ultra red, then out.

*God*

Job, you must understand my provocation.  
The tempter comes to me and I am tempted.  
I'd had about enough of his derision  
Of what I valued most in human nature.  
He thinks he's smart. He thinks he can convince me

It is no different with my followers  
From what it is with his. Both serve for pay.  
Disinterestedness never did exist  
And if it did, it wouldn't be a virtue.  
Neither would fairness. You have heard the doctrine.  
It's on the increase. He could count on no one:  
That was his look out. I could count on you.  
I wanted him forced to acknowledge so much.  
I gave you over to him, but with safeguards.  
I took care of you. And before you died  
I trust I made it clear I took your side  
Against your comforters in their contention  
You must be wicked to deserve such pain.  
That's Browning and sheer Chapel Non-conformism.

*Job* God, please, enough for now. I'm in no mood  
For more excuses.

*God* What I mean to say:  
Your comforters were wrong.

*Job* Oh, that committee!

*God* I saw you had no fondness for committees.  
Next time you find yourself pressed on to one  
For the revision of the Book of Prayer  
Put that in if it isn't in already:

Deliver us from committees. 'Twill remind me.  
I would do anything for you in reason.

*Job* Yes, yes.

*God* You don't seem satisfied.

*Job* I am.

*God* You're pensive.

*Job* Oh, I'm thinking of the Devil.  
You must remember he was in on this.  
We can't leave him out.

*God* No. No, we don't need to.  
We're too well off.

*Job* Someday we three should have  
A good old get-together celebration.

*God* Why not right now?

*Job* We can't without the Devil.

*God* The Devil's never very far away.  
He too is pretty circumambient.

He has but to appear. He'll come for me,  
Precipitated from the desert air.  
Show yourself, son. I'll get back on my throne  
For this I think. I find it always best  
To be upon my dignity with him.

*(The Devil enters like a sapphire wasp  
That flickers mica wings. He lifts a hand  
To brush away a disrespectful smile.  
Job's wife sits up.)*

*Job's Wife* Well, if we aren't all here,  
Including me, the only Dramatis  
Personae needed to enact the problem.

*Job* We've waked her up.

*Job's Wife* I haven't been asleep.  
I've heard what you were saying—every word.

*Job* What did we say?

*Job's Wife* You said the Devil's in it.

*Job* She always claims she hasn't been asleep.  
And what else did we say?

*Job's Wife* Well, what lead up—  
Something about— *(The three men laugh.)*

—The Devil's being God's best inspiration.

*Job* Good, pretty good.

*Job's Wife* Wait till I get my Kodak.  
Would you two please draw in a little closer?  
No—no, that's not a smile there. That's a grin.  
Satan, what ails you? Where's the famous tongue,  
Thou onetime Prince of Conversationists?  
This is polite society you're in  
Where good and bad are mingled everywhichway,  
And ears are lent to any sophistry  
Just as if nothing mattered but our manners.  
You look as if you either hoped or feared  
You were more guilty of mischief than you are.  
Nothing has been brought out that for my part  
I'm not prepared for or that Job himself  
Won't find a formula for taking care of.

*Satan* Like the one Milton found to fool himself  
About his blindness.

*Job's Wife* Oh, he speaks! He *can* speak!  
That strain again! Give me excess of it!  
As dulcet as a pagan temple gong!  
He's twitting us. Oh, by the way, you haven't  
By any chance a Lady Apple on you?

I saw a boxful in the Christmas market.  
How I should prize one personally from you.

*God* Don't *you* twit. He's unhappy. Church neglect  
And figurative use have pretty well  
Reduced him to a shadow of himself.

*Job's Wife* *That* explains why he's so diaphanous  
And easy to see through. But where's he off to?  
I thought there were to be festivities  
Of some kind. We could have charades.

*God* He has his business he must be about.  
Job mentioned him and so I brought him in  
More to give his reality its due  
Than anything.

*Job's Wife* He's very real to me  
And always will be. Please don't go. Stay, stay  
But to the evensong and having played  
Together we will go with you along.  
There are who won't have had enough of you  
If you go now. Look how he takes no steps!  
He isn't really going, yet he's leaving.

*Job* (*Who has been standing dazed with new ideas*)  
He's on that tendency that like the Gulf Stream,

Only of sand not water, runs through here.  
It has a rate distinctly different  
From the surrounding desert; just today  
I stumbled over it and got tripped up.

*Job's Wife* Oh, yes, that tendency! Oh, do come off it.  
Don't let it carry you away. I hate  
A tendency. The minute you get on one  
It seems to start right off accelerating.  
Here, take my hand.

*(He takes it and alights  
In three quick steps as off an escalator.  
The tendency, a long, long narrow strip  
Of middle-aisle church carpet, sisal hemp,  
Is worked by hands invisible off stage.)*

I want you in my group beside the throne—  
Must have you. There, that's just the right arrangement.  
Now someone can light up the Burning Bush  
And turn the gold enameled artificial birds on.  
I recognize them. Greek artificers  
Devised them for Alexius Comnenus.  
They won't show in the picture. That's too bad.  
Neither will I show. That's too bad moreover.  
Now if you three have settled anything  
You'd as well smile as frown on the occasion.

*(Here endeth chapter forty-three of Job.)*



